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ABSTRACT

A teacher action research study, undertaken as part of the larger Schools Reaching Out (SRO) project, sponsored by the Institute for Responsive Education, is described in this report. The project is based on the concept of the urban school, family, and community partnership as a means to improve all children's academic achievement and social success. Implemented in one Boston and one New York City school, the project involved two teacher action research teams, organized to study faculty attitudes and activities concerning family/school relationships and to suggest strategies for improvement, focusing on the teacher role in building family/school partnerships. Methodology involved interviews with faculty from each school. A minigrant program developed by the research team at the Boston school was evaluated through the administration of questionnaires and interviews with parents, students, and teachers at that school. Findings indicated that teachers support one another, but are impeded by the school structure, receive inadequate recognition and compensation, and have limited impact on the formal decision-making process. The program did see an increased awareness of parent/teacher collaboration roles and positive informal changes. A conclusion is that teacher research teams and parent activities--based on shared decision making, choice, and individual empowerment--contrast with the bureaucratic organizational structure of traditional schools. As a strategy for educational reform, the family/school partnership can introduce flexibility and participation into schools' hierarchical structures. However, although the teams provide support and professional growth, they cannot alter the institutionalized decision-making structures without strong administrative support. (93 references) (LMI)

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TEACHER ACTION RESEARCH TEAMS: BUILDING COLLABORATIVE STRUCTURES FOR SCHOOLS

A REPORT FROM THE SCHOOLS REACHING OUT PROJECT

JEAN H. KRASNOW, M.B.A., ED.D.

1991

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TEACHER ACTION RESEARCH TEAMS
BUILDING COLLABORATIVE STRUCTURES FOR SCHOOLS

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Note: The complete report from which this paper is drawn is available from the Institute for Responsive Education, 605 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02215

SECTION I

WORLDS APART: FAMILY/SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS

Introduction

Many children, particulary low income and minority children, are not achieving academic and social success in school. The problem of school failure is well documented and growing. While the United States has an average national dropout rate of 24%, most of our large urban schools systems have dropout rates of 40% (Levin, 1983). Studies of school dropout rates point to economic level rather than race as the major determinant; yet programs designed to serve poor children such as Head Start reach only one out of five children who are eligible (Levin, 1985). Other studies have shown that by third grade you can predict with 70% accuracy which students will drop out of school (Lloyd, 1978). Never before have academic skills been so critical (Comer, 1990) yet, the "massive, once unsurpassed system of publicly administered schools is failing students, their families, and communitities" (Seeley, 1981).

Home/school connections are a critical element in the development of motivation in all children but in schools where parents and teachers reflect substantial differences in economic and social status, there has often been very limited communication between families and the schools and little if any parent involvement in the schools (Davies, 1987). While a substantial amount of research has demonstrated the vital importance of parent involvement for the academic achievement of children (Henderson, 1981,1987) for many children, home and school remain "worlds apart".

Many of the current efforts to address this problem emphasize the development of partnerships between home and school. It is the schools --more than the families-- that are in a position to create the conditions needed to overcome the barriers to greater parental involvement. Changes in the organization and structure of schools based on knowledge of human development can create new conditions that reduce barriers to family/school cooperation and enhance student academic and social success (Comer, 1990). To achieve these changes, some schools are examining their current, often bureaucratic and inward looking structures and inventing new ways of relating to and working with parents.

This paper reports on an teacher action research study which was undertaken as part of a larger project known as Schools Reaching Out (SRO) sponsored by the Institute for Responsive Education in Boston, Massachusetts. SRO was a "multifaceted project which sought to foster the idea that school, family, community partnerships can be a major tool for urban schools committed to helping all their children achieve academic and social success" (Davies, 1990). The project was carried out in two schools, one in Boston and one in New York City. These schools agreed to be "laboratory" schools, to try out new methods of working with parents, and to report, with the help of outside researchers, on the results of their efforts. The hope was that the experience of the laboratory schools might produce insights and suggestions on ways to enhance parent/teacher collaboration and as a result, increase the academic and social achievement of all children.

Two teacher action research teams were organized to study faculty attitudes and activities concerning family/school relationships and to

propose and implement interventions to improve these relationships. I acted as facilitator to the teacher research teams and with their help and collaboration authored this paper.

The specific purpose of the teacher action research component of SRO was to study the role of teachers in building family/school partnerships and to promote an examination and reflection on practice by teachers. Teachers, like family members, are key elements in the social world of the child. Alone, they cannot be expected to change what has been called a child's "master setting" (Delone, 1979). Yet teachers have enormous influence on the social and academic development as well as the cognitive achievement of a child. Teaching is filled with potential interventions both in the daily life of the classroom and in the relationships with the families of the children in the school. Improved family/school relationships cannot develop nor school change proceed without their active involvement.

The recent wave of reports and reform efforts directed toward school improvement often recommend more classes, more requirements, and more testing to achieve excellence. Often the concept embedded in these reports has meant that well known individuals outside the schools analyze school failure and offer solutions. We have heard very little from the classroom teachers.

An fundamental theme throughout this research effort and Schools Reaching Out is that of empowerment and the development of "voice". As the project sought to empower parents, teacher action research attempted to mirror that effort by providing an opportunity for teachers to increase their control and decision making over events and conditions of their work life. It seemed unreasonable to expect teachers to empower others and welcome others into their professional

space unless they too had a share in shaping that space. Expanding the repetoire of skills, and behaviors, affecting attitudes, and building those new thoughts into the culture and daily operation of the school can only happen with teacher involvement, not in the form of impersonal directives.

TEACHER ACTION RESEARCH TEAMS: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Two teacher action research teams each with four members were formed in the laboratory schools during the spring of 1989. These teams interviewed faculty members, designed small intervention projects to increase the involvement of parents in their classrooms, and evaluated these projects. They assisted in the development of a minigrant program and met to discuss their own efforts to "reach out" to parents as well as the progress of the school's efforts to improve family/school relationships. This methodology was chosen for two reasons. First, the literature on organizations suggests that small problem solving teams that operate within an organization but outside its formal structure can successfully generate new ideas, build collaborative norms within the institutions and bring about organizational reform. Thus, the research design was an effort to link the experience of the private sector to the schools. Secondly, as the SRO project sought to empower parents and bring them into the educational life of their children, this research was designed to model that same process with teachers in order to encourage greater participation by teacher in the decisions concerning their school and worklife and to hear from teachers who are often "the lost voices" in

the debates about educational reform (Lightfoot, 1988).

Action Research

Action research occurs when members of a community or organization undertake to study problems they have defined and to suggest and implement solutions to those problems based on their research findings. A commonly used definition of action research (Rapaport, 1970) suggests its goals:

Action research aims to contribute both to the practical concerns of people in an immediate problematic situation and to the goals of social science by the joint collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework.

Action research strategy has typically been selected when several conditions existed:

1) employees held information critical to understanding the problem
2) previous studies done by and for management had not solved the problem
3) initial investigation suggested that employee-manager relationships were key factors, and
4) when research methods that re-emphasized existing power relations might suppress vital information. (Brown, 1984).

Some examples of action research come from the private sector. Typically, employees and managers form a study committee to guide the research. Together they formulate interview questions, act as participant observers, design questionnaires, plan and deliver feedback to the management and finally to the whole plant or factory. In Changemasters, Rosabeth Moss Kanter discussed this process of

creating alternative organizational forms within an existing organization. She described problem solving teams whose members are respresentative of many roles within the organization. She referred to these teams as parallel structures which mediated the rigidity of bureacractic systems and introduced innovation into the organization (Kanter, 1982).

In public settings, action research has been used by local community groups to attempt to solve school and community problems. Action research combines the development of confidence with specific action. Fact finding and the skills of analysis that result from research methodology cut overwhelming social problems down to a more human scale (Parker & Jacobsen,1974). Research thus becomes a form of action when it is done, not by the experts, but by the people who themselves must act: parents, high school students, commmunity residents, etc. (Palmer & Jacobsen, 1974). It can also become a form of empowerment as people are organized to define problems, gather facts and in the process develop competencies, and see opportunities for specific action. This parallels the concept of empowerment described by Cochran that asserts that individuals know best what they need and should be encouraged to identify and fulfill those needs rather than follow those set by outsiders.

A similar research tradition emerged from the work of Paolo Freire's approach to adult education which seeks to "engage individuals in critical analysis and organized action to improve their situations" (Freire, 1981). This form of research has as its ultimate goal a fundamental structural transformation and improvement in the lives of those involved (Brown,1984). Researchers often train local people to

use research skills, develop a network of groups committed to using the information generated, and mobilize a larger constitutency to influence local, state, or regional decision makers. Participatory researchers encourage their clients to define the problem from their own perspective. The success of the research is measured by the increased strength of the client community and its progress through the stages of empowerment. Researchers, in this model, fully expect to encounter resistence from those groups whose interests are challenged. Action research is one strategy in the process of removing barriers to an individual's opportunity to achieve equal status.

Teacher Research

The model of action research described above does not fit easily into the current school setting. The partnership between research and application is not well developed in the public school environment. While teachers may not be correctly defined as "oppressed", in many ways their lack of autonomy and decision making power within the urban school bureaucracies is similar to the powerlessness described in Friere's work.

Recently there have been some efforts by teachers to research their teaching and learning experience and share that with their colleagues. Teacher research is not research on teaching. Rather it provides a role for teachers in generating new knowledge about teaching and learning by making the school a center of inquiry (Schaefer, 1967). Teacher research is defined as a systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers: a desire to make sense of their experiences by establishing the research agenda themselves in contrast to following a research agenda set by the universities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). Through teacher journals, essays, interviewing, and

classroom studies, teachers have begun to adopt a learning stance toward classroom life and to report their findings to their colleagues. Teacher research as currently used describes a wide range of activities within the general category of action research. One of the leaders in this field is Lawrence Stenhouse who sees teacher research as part of a process to demystify and democractize research and believes that through their own research, teachers can strength their judgement and improve their practice (Hustler, Cassisy & Cuff, 1986). Unlike university research, teacher research is not supported by the institution within which the researchers work. It struggles "on the fringe" of the K-12 structure and certainly does not have the legitimacy currently given what has been called "high status knowledge" attained through traditional modes of inquiry (Cochran-Smith, Lytle, 1990). However, supporters of teacher research argue that it can play a central role in creating new learning both for the school based teacher community and the university based research community. They describe the "power of research to help understand and ultimate transform teaching practice" as teachers find connections between theory and practice, become critical readers of research, and change the "nature of classroom discourse" (Goswami &Stillman, 1987).

The teacher action research teams in this study were not looking exclusively at their own classroom practice, as is currently typical of teacher research, but rather at the school wide problem of the lack of positive parent teacher cooperation. The model for this design was the work done in the Mastery in Learning (MIL) project sponsored by the National Educational Association. (Livingston &Castle, 1989). MIL is a school based education reform initiative to help "faculties take an

active role in directing school renewal" by developing a school profile, inventorying faculties, reviewing research and developing a comprehensive change effort based on research and faculty priorities. Designers of the model believe that "without active practitioner involvement in the creation of knowledge, the body of information is less germane to the persistent problems of schooling" and that the traditional model of researcher/practitioner relationship in education has separated the two, "positing the research community as the source of knowledge to be applied by personnel in the schools" (Livingston & Castle, 1989).

The project offers a model of school reform where, on one hand, research informs practice and, on the other, "intelligent practitioners through deliberations, make important connections and adaptations themselves" (Livingston & Castle, 1989). Thus the research goal reflects the ideal: "to frame situations or problems differently and interpret reality through new metaphors" (Schon, 1983, 1987).

Teacher action research teams provided an opportunity to begin a conversation with teachers about the currently relationship between the school and families in the community. The methodology was selected to reinforce and model the participatory nature of the Schools Reaching Out project and because evidence from the private sector suggested that using small problem solving teams could introduce elements of organization health and creativity into a highly bureaucratic system.

TEACHER ACTION RESEARCH: The Year's Activities

Recruitment

The description of the SRO teacher research team opportunity and an application form (see appendix A) were placed in every teacher's mailbox in mid April of 1989. Within a week four teachers in Boston had applied. Two were classroom teachers (K-1, 2nd) and two were specialists (Computer and Reading). A fifth application from another classroom teacher came in late but was accepted. Of the original four, two teachers were white, two were African American. All were female. The fifth teacher was Latino. We decided that a research group representative of the student and teaching population of the school was very desirable. One teacher volunteered to resign to make a space for the fifth applicant, but SRO funds were made available for a five, not the originally budgeted, four member team. In New York, I received one application. When I went to New York in early May, I spoke with teachers who had been recommended to me as having postive relationships with parents. After some changes over the summer and the addition in Boston of another classroom teacher, the team in New York had one classroom teacher and three "out of classroom" specialist and in Boston, the reverse was true. The Boston team had three classroom teachers and one specialist.

In general, the people who applied had demonstrated interest and commitment to the project in its first year, were strong believers in the goal of increasing parent involvement and had served on numerous planning committees for this and other projects in the school. The applications indicated various aspects of teacher interest: "ideas and strategies used in the past, many have not worked or helped us to reach parents/guardians...we need to be about a change", "...a

professional interest in a new learning experience "Teacher As Researcher", "...I want to see those two elements (home and school) work together so that all children have advantage to be successful in this society".

Training

Two workshops were held in the late spring to introduce the team members in each school to research on parent involvement and the research plan for the comming year. I prepared materials and distributed them before the meetings. The articles included one by Don Davies entitled *Looking for an Ecological Solution* and another by Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, *On Goodness in Schools, Themes of Empowerment*; as well as a series of short research summaries I had written.

The second workshop dealt more specifically with research ideas for the project. I reviewed ideas about participant observation calling it "research by walking around" and we discussed the idea that each person sees through his or her own lens or "frame of reference". We drew up questions for a survey to be conducted during the fall to identify teacher attitudes about parent involvement at the Ellis School.

In Boston, the four member teacher research team met after-school 15 times between April 1989 and March 1990. Each meeting lasted approximately 1 1/2 hours. I spent two days each week at the school dividing my time between activities to support the teacher team members, the development of a mini-grant program, and the events at the Parents Center. In New York, the teacher research team met 9 times. Often squeezed between lunch and recess duty, these meetings never achieved the reflective quality of the more relaxed after school setting in Boston. Many times, the teacher research meeting went on

for two to three hours with individuals coming or going as their teaching or supervisory responsibilities demanded.

Research Activities

In September and October, the teachers interviewed their colleagues to determine their hopes and concerns about increasing parent involvement in the schools. During meetings in November, we reviewed those interviews. In Boston, the teacher team moved on to the design and implementation of a series of projects they collectively labelled Raise a Reader. Funded by the minigrant program of SRO, these projects were implemented throughout December, January, and February. In late March an evaluation of the projects was undertaken by the teachers. For the purposes of evaluation they contacted parents and interviewed the children in their classes. In New York, the meetings continued in a discussion rather than action format. The teachers encouraged the staff to participate in the mini grant project and continued to collect data on the daily relationship between parents and teachers in the school. Their discussions were tied more to daily, concrete incidents that they observed in the relationship between parents and teachers.

In May and June I compiled the data from the year's work of the teacher action research teams. I shared all of the material with team members. They were concerned that certain material be omitted, that conversations, often informal, be reported in more formal prose. And they felt that rather than identify individuals by name or the schools precisely, there was more to learn by combining the information from both schools and identifying themes that reflected the experience of both of the laboratory schools. That strategy, they felt, could promote learning about the issue of improving parent/teacher relationships

while maintaining some element of privacy for the participants in the study. I have tried to adhered to their requests.

Section II

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FROM WHICH THE STUDY WAS DEVELOPED

The first element in the conceptual framework for this study is drawn from the work of Lightfoot as developed in Worlds Apart which analyzes the origins of the tensions between home and school, particularly in schools with low income and minority children. The second is from the field of organizational analysis as described in the writing of McGregor, Kanter, and Levinson and applied to schools by James Comer.

Worlds Apart: The Relationship Between Parents and Teachers

Lightfoot, in her book Worlds Apart examined the relationships between schools and the families of poor and minority children and explained the different but complementary functions of families and schools in the education and socialization of young children. All families and schools face the task of defining relationships between the school and the families it serves. Tensions, says Lightfoot, will always exist between the two roles of parent and teacher. These tensions are experienced by all children as they move from home to school. A parent sees his or her particular 'child', not 'children' in general. A child has intimate, primary and special relationships with parents; with their teachers they may have special relationships, but these are secondary, more general and more limited in time. Teachers and parents don't

always know where the parent boundary ends and the teacher boundary begins. That causes some understandable anxiety and discomfort.

While family/school tension is inevitable and can be positive for growth, it can also be understood as part of a broader social process. Some families and schools have a more difficult time developing positive relationships than others. Sharp differences of economic class, ethnicity, or race add to the fundamental tension between families and schools. Conflict and distrust between families and schools is greater when "they reflect differences in status and power in society" (Lightfoot,1978). When negative perceptions and stereotypes operate, these negative views shape expectations of both parent and student behavior. A classroom and a school are not isolated from the social and economic realities of the community in which they are located. When, as a result of the unequal power relationhip found in the society at large, the relationships between families and schools is highly asymmetric, the nature of the tension can turn to hostility.

The greater these differences the less likely that a smooth transition between home and school will occur. It is conflict based on inequality, racism, and ethnocentrism, not conflict per se, explains Lightfoot, that impedes the development of positive family/school relationships. Tension can be positive and functional for growth, but it is necessary to "recognize and distinguish between positive and negative dissonance" (Lightfoot, 1978).

School as the embodiment of "mainstream" values has sometimes seen as its mission the separation of the child from the "evil effects" of his/her family and culture. "Stay away" is the message often given to certain families, "we know what is best for your child". Thus, the

expected and normal tension between home and school which is functional to the growth and development of a child turns instead to "hostility, distrust, and unequal power" which causes great anxiety for the child and the family.

Relationships of mutual respect which recognize differences and which can be positive for growth, can only occur as power is more equally shared between home and school. Lightfoot suggests that in order to build new, more trusting relationships between low income and minority families and the schools, it is critical to provide explicit opportunities for families and school people to come together "in deliberate and self conscious ways in order to get to know one another". Lightfoot has called this "finding faces in the crowd". Such events as parties, bake sales, and other socially relaxed events are not trivial, although they may seem so. Rather they are the prelude to authentic interaction which can develop after "some level of harmony" has been achieved.

In this analysis, Lightfoot has offered a perspective on family/school relationships that demonstrates how the organization of schools has come to embody certain assumptions about individuals and groups. These assumptions reflect the social and economic structure of our society and reinforce behaviors by both parents and teachers which impede children's learning opportunities. Explicit efforts by the school to bring parents and teachers together are necessary if those assumptions are to be challenged.

The Relationship of School Organization to Parent/Teacher Partnership

While some tension between parents and teachers may be a reality

of school life, the increasing bureaucratic organization of urban schools has intensified an already serious breach between the families and teachers of low income and minority children.

Individuals interested in school reform have begun to look at the organization of schools themselves, their work patterns and the assumptions about people that such structures reflect and have asked the question: who is failing--children or the schools ?

Two fundamental orientations to organizational structure emerge from such studies: hierarchical control and collaboration (Mcgregor, 1966; Levinson, 1973; Kanter, 1982; Peters and Waterman, 1982). Critics of the current bureaucratic structure believe that "contemporary organizations have sacrificed the freedom of their employees in favor of control over those employees to the disadvantage of both the employees and the organization. The decision to do so is based upon assumptions about people and organizational structure that are unreasonable, unwise and unnecessary" (Clark &Meloy, 1990). Forms of organization are not neutral, embedded in them are assumptions about individual motivation, intellectual capacities, and potential for leadership. In hierarchical organizations control is emphasized because the organization sees people as lacking ambition, disliking responsibility, preferring to be led, gullible and not very bright (McGregor, 1966). Policies, practices and programs within such organizations reflect these assumptions. While "the social scientist does not deny that the human behavior in organizations today is approximately what management perceives; they believe that this behavior is not a consequence of man's inherent nature. It is a consequence rather of the nature of industrial organizations,

management philosophy, policies and practices. [The theory] has confused what is cause and what is effect" (McGregor, 1966). This analysis is particularly applicable to the current, highly bureuacratic structure of schools.

Many schools are not good environments for learning, in part, because the schools have become bureaucracies, and bureaucratic organizations are not designed to promote collaboration and inquiry. The isolated, cellular structure of classroom practice, the hierarchical and limited role definition which is reflected both in teacher assignment and in the student tracking system, and the inward looking nature of the organization all work to impede the development of the relationships and creativity critical to learning.

Bureaucracy with its emphasis on economy, efficiency, and standardization seemed the most practical way to solve the problems of rapidly growing urban school systems. Replication of schools was simple: detailed procedures, prescribed content, and a poorly paid, largely female work force controlled by a few administrators. Multiple self contained classrooms minimized the impact of high turnover and limited training. As schools grew, previously separated classrooms were simply collected together in cellular arrangement. No task interdependence developed among teachers; the one room school shifted to teachers teaching all one age or all one subject. Whatever they taught, they taught alone (Lortie, 1975).

An organization based on standardization and interchangeable parts suited large scale industrial production but did not advance relationships between teachers and students or between parents and teachers. Learning is not a mechanistic, even purely cognitive process. It grows out of a relationship between the teacher and the student,

between the school and the community it serves. Studies of at-risk students in alternative school settings (Raywid, 1985), Catholic High Schools (Coleman, 1987), and effective high schools (Dornbush, 1988) all point to the centrality of relationships to motivation. Lack of motivation "is often not a characteristic of the child but a direct result of inflexible, non-responsive bureaucratic relationships" (Seeley, 1981).

The asymmetic power relationship between parents and the schools described by Lightfoot is mirrored in the relationships between teachers and the school organizational structure. Characteristics of healthy organizations: (care and support from others, opportunities for growth and professional development, opportunities for decision making over workplace conditions) are not characteristic of large bureaucracies (Levinson, 1973). Teachers, asked to reach out and help empower parents toward participation in schools, are themselves excluded from similar participation in their workplace, the school. Building collaborative relationships among individuals within the school may be a first step to facilitate the development of more collaborative home school relationships.

In applying elements of organizational theory to the schools, Comer supports the Lightfoot analysis and reinforces the need for schools to initiate new relationships with parents. His analysis points to a critical aspect of academic achievement. Motivation for learning, he argues, is a "function of social relationships and overall development" and "an individual child's biological potential for learning can be realized or severely limited by the quality of relationships the child experiences in the home and family social network, in school, and in social networks of the larger society" (Comer, 1990). He explains that what he calls

"mainstream" parents interact with their children to model and promote social and interactive behaviors that are considered acceptable in school and other mainstream institutions and these behaviors and attitudes about learning or education are internalized by the child. When families do not provide such modelling, the child enters "without having mastered the skills and behaviors necessary for academic success" and as result of this lack of preparation, "these children present themselves to the school in a way that they are viewed as bad, and dumb" regardless of their intellectual potential (Comer, 1990). Schools, then, punish this "badness" and the students "expected to show low academic performance will often do so." (Comer, 1990) The New Haven school project reflects Comer's understanding that "schools---more than parents---are in a position to create the conditions needed to overcome difficult relationship barriers". The project organized a school management team of parents, teachers, administrators, and support personnel to look at the school efforts to connect with parents and address student needs. They changed the school into a collaborative organization and in doing so acted upon fundamentally different assumptions about parents, children, and teachers. They assumed "that motivation, potential for development, capacity for assuming responsibility, and readiness are present in all people and that the essential tasks of management are creating opportunities, releasing potential, removing obstacles, encouraging growth, and providing guidance (McGregor. 1966). In this framework, "ideas from any are treated as ideas from the influential" (Clark, Meloy, 1989).

Both Lightfoot and Comer stress the centrality of relationships to motviation and learning. Both argue that schools can fundamentally

change their relationships with parents. But, while Lightfoot's work helps to explain the very real challenges to such change, Comer provides a more concrete organizational model through which to pursue the change process.

SECTION III

"FINDING FACES IN THE CROWD"

TEACHERS AND PARENTS WORKING TOGETHER

The material that follows describes and interprets some of the activities, events that occurred as parents and teachers began meeting each other and working together in the laboratory schools. While many different activities took place, it is the relationships that developed or failed to develop from those activities that were critically important. Tasks or events may change from year to year as the teachers and parents, together or separately, carry out their agendas. But the creation of personal relationships and the growing belief in the potential to build future relationships develops the capacity within the school to value contributions from all groups. It is within such a new, more positive, and trusting atmosphere that both parents and teachers are confident to raise issues and negotiate differences. The school, as a result, can move toward becoming a more collaborative institution.

TEACHER ACTION RESEARCH: I

Faculty Interviews

In the Fall of 1990, the teacher research teams interviewed

members of the school faculties. In these interviews teachers talked about a wide range of benefits from increased parent involvement. They spoke of an increase in student self esteem and an increase in academic achievement. They mentioned improved test scores and improved behavior. They said that increased parent involvement would send a message to the children about the importance of education and that improved family/school communication would be good for children to see. They said students would feel more supported in their schooling if parents took more time, in school and out, to support educational efforts and that the support would carry over into classroom achievement. One teacher summed it up by saying:

> "children will take school more seriously because the parent is interested and actively involved. Parents will be more able to help their children if they actually help in the classroom. They will learn how to teach their own children."

Other expected results of parent involvement mentioned by the teachers were that parents, once involved, could be a great help to teachers in their classrooms, as an extra set of hands for projects, tutoring, field trips etc. and that parents might come to understand the stresses and strains of teaching. Finally one teacher mentioned the effect of parent involvement on teaching style. She said, "by having parents helping in the classroom, teachers will become more responsive to the individual needs of children".

Teachers saw increased parent/child communication as one very important form of parent involvement. They want parents to spend

more time talking to their children. Teachers spoke about the importance of parents taking time to read to children, asking about homework and the events of the school day, and taking time to explain about the importance of education. One teacher said, " (parents could) spend more time verbalizing about school, not so much an inquisition but rather a conversation". Many of the teacher responses reflected their desire to see a conversation between children and their parents. They mentioned increased discipline rarely; they mention increased time (to read, to take trips, to talk, to explain things) often. Teachers mentioned that they hoped parents would "show a child good things to be interested in, like hobbies, books, and trips" and give them "more opportunities to be children, instead of babysitting and cooking chores."

When asked how parents could be involved in the school, responses were more diverse. Some teachers just wanted parents to come to the school for conferences. Others talked about parents as helpers for the teacher in the classroom (tutors, clerical aides, help with field trips), while others felt parents should organize their own activities (graduations, parties, parent training workshops) and leave the classroom to the teacher . Two teachers expressed more expansive views:

> "First, an educated parent body, informed about our goals for their children in our school. From goals come questions and then we should hold workshops for the parents so they can be aware of what we are teaching and how we teach and the results we expect. Third, we need their support, we are a team. They need to be part of their children's education, that doesn't mean they sit in the class, but by being supportive at home,

their involvement is very important."

"Perhaps this scene is far too idealistic, but I envision a school where administration, teachers, parents, and students as well as the entire staff work together as a comunity. A school community that welcomes, accepts, trusts, and supports parents in their endeavors to nurture, rear, and educate their youngsters."

Teachers had no difficulty when asked to describe specific examples of successful parent involvement efforts from their own teaching or that of a colleague. They mentioned such events as parent/teacher dinners, student performances, hands on workshop activities for parents, parents providing for food for class events and celebrations, parents making phone calls and home visits, parents fund raising activities for needed school supplies, asking parents to speak about their work, hobbies, etc. and, class or grade level breakfasts to show students work to parents

And, teachers had no difficulty explaining why some efforts failed to involve parents. They mentioned that parents often can't attend events because of working hours or because they don't always receive notes sent home with children, or have literacy problems themselves. Also true is that contacting parents some times takes many calls and teacher run out of time.

Two teachers explained these problems in more detail:

"Parents did not have a say in what was being given to them. Notices went out too late, meeting dates were constantly changing, and the activities were teacher oriented, not parent oriented."

"When parents are made to feel they are worthwhile and that they have a role to play at school, they will be more than happy to work with teachers."

"Maybe because of their own experience, they assume it's (a message from school) is negative, but it is not always negative."

Many teachers felt it was primarily their responsibility to initiate contact between the home and the school. However several said that a letter from the principal would be helpful to "lay the ground work so that teachers may become familiar with the guidelines, then go ahead and make his/her approach to the parents." Teachers feel parents also have a responsibility to make contact with the school. One teacher said, "They should honestly come in and work with teachers, stay on the same wavelength and provide a great deal of cooperation and enforce the same rules as the teacher". Another wanted parents to communicate continually with the teacher and "offer suggestions themselves, be open, truthful and supportive and make the teacher aware of problems at home and view the teachers as an ally, not a foe--and don't be intimidated by teachers."

Finally teachers were asked what concerns, if any, they had about an increased role for parents in the life of the school. There were several. First teachers expressed a genuine confusion about what an expanded role for parents would look like. They expressed concern about parents just dropping in to their classrooms and stressed the need for parent training prior to classroom work. They feared that the administration would "cater" to the parents and that the children whose parents were

in the school would "take advantage" and try "to get away with everything". Many teachers saw a need for a scheduled structured program that they thought would help both parents and teachers understand their roles. One teacher commented that teachers are not accustomed to having other adults in the room with them and explained:

> "I used to work in Head Start and it was part of the program to have parents in our class. I'm used to parents in my class. It was really annoying if you aren't used to it. It was good, training the parent, they saw how things were done; they taught us a few things, there were different cultures and they taught us their way of doing things and they learned from us. It was not a one way thing."

Another teacher expressed the generalized concern of several teachers when she said:

> "I don't have any real concerns except that parents realize that there are some things that educators may know a student needs and the parents may want something different. For example, a teacher may say academics first and parents may say social; we need to work together."

This series of faculty interviews demonstrated that a large percent of the staff felt that increased parent involvement would have a number of significant benefits for the school. And, teachers were clear about what they wanted parents to do at home. They emphasized ongoing communication, conversation skills, activities which expose

children to the world around them, and frequent reminders about the importance of education. Teachers easily listed successful strategies for involving parents and identified possible reasons why some efforts fail. The question about concerns that teachers may have about an increased role for parents raised some interesting issues concerning the schedule of activities, teacher expectations, perceptions of parent competence, and the potential conflicts involving the evaluation of staff.

The teacher research teams concluded that, taken as a whole, the interviews demonstrated that often teachers speak about parents as if they were not "good enough" parents; that many teachers are not convinved that the parents with little education are able to help their children, and that teachers are apprehensive about parents in their classrooms and unsure of their role toward parents once parents enter the school. Apparently the expressed benefits that might result in the future from increased parent involvement in the school are more than matched by the sense of immediate, concrete concerns about how such new relationships might work. Teacher researchers commented on how contradictory it seemed to see parents as unskilled, perhaps not competent to help a child and at the same time be fearful of their power to evaluate professional staff.

Despite these concerns, some teachers did establish regular ongoing communication with parents. During the first two weeks of school several teachers tried to call every parent in their class and introduce themselves. Teachers who made efforts to communicate with parents said it was often a challenge. One reseacher explained, "I called all the children in my class last night. Many had wrong numbers, some are going other places, some just said they weren't coming to our

school....". When she finally did reach them, "they were delighted to hear from me, especially since it wasn't bad news". Very few teachers in either of the laboratory schools made home visits although the topic was frequently discussed in researcher meetings. The teachers felt that doing home visits was very risky and usually did not consider doing them unless they had not been able to reach parents in other ways.

Observations: Family/School Communication

> "What does it feel like to be an non-English speaking parent in a school? Lost, afraid, confused. Who am I going to talk to? What am I going to say? Schools make it harder, no translators mean that no one is giving me any importance. They should have everyday all day translators. Schools could help themselves to have willing parents, will come to know they can be useful. (Parent)

Administrators in the laboratory schools did not provide teachers with an explicit policy or guidelines for communication with parents, although they did verbally encourage communication. Newsletters to parents from both principals were infrequent and bilingual versions of materials came from central offices, not the school office. When the Parent Centers in each school sent out notices, they were always in English and Spanish. This was not always the case for school announcements. Neither school had secretarial staff that spoke Spanish, and while each laboratory school had one administrator that was bilingual, neither had time to provide the ongoing translating that was needed.

Parents said a welcoming attitude was more important than language skill. Parents waiting on the benches outside the principals office said they felt like the misbehaving children they sat next to and said that the attitudes of the office personnel were the key first signal to them about how the school chose to communicate with them.

School personnel said that communication with parents is important, but there were very few efforts made to establish systematic, ongoing communication with families. Even for those parents who have some contact with the school, letters and calls are often sporadic. Parents in the Center were even concerned that teachers were not handing out notices, and that only certain classes were taking material home. The challenges to greater communication are significant --- language barriers, literacy problems, and the stressful family situations of many children at the school. Some teachers made efforts to communicate. However, it is not a school norm in either school to establish regular, ongoing communication with parents. It is not a school norm to inform parents of classroom activities, to explain curriculum models to parents or to send home suggestions of how parents can help their children at home. What was striking was that while teachers and administrators want parents to take more time to talk with their children and develop "not an inquisition but a conversation," they do not initiate a similar conversation with parents.

Several parents visited the school in the first few days of the year, some to gather information about the school, others to arrange for children's transportation. Many new faces appeared to register students, to meet teachers, and assess the school plant. Several of the kindergarten parents brought children in for screening. These parents appeared excited, anxious to see if their children "passed" these

screening tests, and showed relief when the kindergarten teacher declared everything was "just fine". One researcher commenting on how important these opening days of school were and how the lack of order in the school itself (new hiring not yet completed, class assignments unsettled, class lists, phone numbers, and teachers schedules incomplete) affected the teachers' ability to welcome parents said, "There is so much change at the opening (of school) when you should really be available and organized for the children".

Communication is a message about value and expectations and often parallels the power relationship perceived by the sender. If individuals value someone else then positive communication occurs, communication that is respectful and informative. Throughout the year we might expect to see letters, photos of children, or copies of their work or explanations of curriculum objectives and school events sent home. The first few days of school sets that tone.

In fact when teacher researchers did send letters home informing the parents of class activities and field trips, many parents voluteered to chaperone trips and help out in the classroom. One mother, at home with a new baby, did some clerical work for the teacher. Her daughter acted as courier. At the breakfasts later in the year, parents mentioned how much they enjoyed the letters. Yet, the myths continue about "hard to reach" parents perhaps because the individual parent who volunteers is lost in the institutional attitude about parents as a group.

As the Lightfoot analysis suggests those attitudes are part of the socialization process of our society and have become embedded in its institutions. One administrator commented that he stopped sending letters to parents because parents in his school don't read letters. The

communities in which the schools are located have many serious economic problems and incidents of both violence and drug abuse. Parents in one school made their first project convincing the police to fence off the children's play area so that drug users could not hang out there at night. Teachers, following the news of street violence, could identify young people shot and even killed as former students: "I remember the seat he sat in". Yet, both neighborhoods also had culturally rich and diverse institutions, colleges, universities, churches, museums, theatres, famous homes, and well known artists. Why, when the context can be viewed as a resource or an impediment, is it so difficult to see strengths?

It is within these contexts and cultural boundries that parents and teachers must start to communicate. But, moving those boundries is an essential mission of the school. One researcher commented, "why do the negatives always win?" and another, commenting on the positive reaction she received from parents after phoning each family, said, "Where do these myths about parents come from?". Perhaps in that reflection was the beginning of change. More aware of what the norms were, teachers tried to make some changes.

The material that follows shifts the focus from the previous discussion of interviews and observations to a review of some of the actions explicitly undertaken to bring parents and teachers together. The interviews and early observation indicated a general understanding of the benefits to be gained from parent involvement yet only a limited number of actions were taken to initiate such involvement. The teacher research teams decided to design projects that reflected the teacher goals expressed in the interviews and that suited their individual classroom needs. They tried to involve parents in classroom activities

and at the same time provide models that other teachers might choose to adopt. The teacher mini-grant project provide one framework for those beginning efforts to build closer family/ school connections.

The Mini-Grant Projects

Design

The teacher mini-grants project offered teachers the opportunity to apply for small grants to implement a particular classroom activity. The grant specified that the activity had to include parents. While the strategies teachers chose varied, they all had a similar goal: to increase the personal contact between parents and teachers and thereby build the capacity for more positive working relationships toward school change and increased student achievement. The mini-grants provided a specific concrete experience in parent involvement as opposed to the theoretical arguments about the value of involving parents. These small projects served to challenge rather directly the "myth" that parents do not want to be involved.

SRO allocated $3,000 for the mini-grant program in each school. The teacher research teams assumed the small administrative tasks of the project. Thus there was no "overhead" cost for the project. The grants were limited to no more than $250.00 each. The grants were awarded by the School Planning Councils in each school. Once the awards were approved, checks were issued by the Institute for Responsive Education directly to the teacher receiving the grant. This was noted as most unusual. Teachers could spent the funds where and whenever they chose to purchase the books and related materials for the projects. They were required to turn in receipts of purchases. Teachers

commented that the procedure reflected trust and confidence in the teachers.

Grants Awarded

The first grant applications were written by the members of the Teacher Research Team in Boston. In the faculty interviews conducted in the early Fall, the teachers identified reading as one area where teachers wanted increased parent involvement. Parents reading more with their children was a very high priority of the team members as well. The teacher research team designed a series of projects they thought would encourage more reading at home.

Three teachers requested $200.00 each for the purchase of multicultural, high interest, books for the children in their grades. For the Kindergartens, 1st, 2nd and 3rd grades, bright, red cloth bags were made for the children to use to carry the books to and from school. The bags served both to protect the books and as a "signal" to parents. In the letter sent home to explain the projects, the teachers made reference to the bags, and asked parents to look for them and ask their children about the books inside. Each book was carded and prepared for sign out using library cards and pockets. Each classroom had a large poster board with a library pockets on it, a pocket for each child. Children quickly learned to sign out and return the books. A simple classroom library was created. In the letter to the parents the teachers explained the importance of reading and requested that parents try to read with their children at least three to four times per week.

The fourth "Read at Home" grant was originally design to involve special education parents and their children in at home activities, but it

was not implemented. Instead the teacher worked with another teacher in a combined effort to help students write autobiographies.

IRE staff designed the book bag, purchased fabric, and made the first, sample bags. As additional "Read at Home" grants were approved for another kindergarten and the two first grades, parents at the Center made the bags. Finally, a teacher found parents who made the bags at home. The first three Read At Home grants were implemented by December 15, 1989.

The announcement of the minigrants had been placed in all teachers' mailboxes during the early Fall. Two teachers took the opportunity to apply before the projects designed by the Teacher Research Team were underway. One was for a video to be produced jointly by the recepient of the grant (a special education teacher) and other teachers, parents, and students about the importance of reading. The video will be used by the school, can be loaned home to families, and may be used on the local cable TV. The funds went to rent special equipment necessary to augment the capacity of the hand held camera owned by the school.

The second grant was given to a fourth grade teacher who wanted to have parents and students work together on a research paper dealing with careers. Parents and students worked on research, the preparation of a large poster to review the major characteristics and requirements of certain careers, and the parents were asked to come in and talk about their work history. The funds went for materials and a small stipend of "thank you" to the parents for coming in to the class during their work day.

In late December, a letter was written to the faculty outlining the first set of grants and encouraging applications. Additional

applications were received. One was for materials so that students could complete a family and personal history. "Collecting Your own History" asked parents and students to work together collecting photos and memorabelia about the family. Another grant was for a software writing program so students could work on their family history and publish books. A final grant was for a classroom library to enrich the materials available for students to read at home after the teacher identified a serious lack of "early adolescent" literature in the school library.

Several of the grants in New York school furthered the whole language initiative of the school. Teachers requested funds to establish a whole language resource center for parents and teachers, and for materials for parent workshops in whole language development. Several teachers used their grants to pay for transportation costs to museums, botantical gardens, and in one case to the Princeton University Athletic facility as part of a unit on fitness and health. In all cases parents joined the class in the preparations for the trip and the trip itself. The grant developed by the art teacher was a particularly good example of how parents can be integrated into the curriculum work of the children. All parents could participate in some aspect of the grant since potential issues of language and literacy were reduced.

TEACHER ACTION RESEARCH: II

Parent Evaluation of the Mini-grants

The teacher research team in Boston conducted an evaluation of their minigrant projects. Questionnaires were prepared by the team for children, and parents involved in the projects. Approximately 245

Parents indicated it was not always easy to find time but that they considered it important to make the effort. Again, parent responses:

"Well, it hasn't been easy because by the time my daughter comes home from school I would be at work. But since she goes in the morning now I guess I'll have more time to spend with her."

"Not as much as I would like to. Sometimes I have been able to read the stories to my child but a lot of times I have been busying preparing dinner. And busy with work. I have been tired. But my son is a very good reader and he reads to her when I can't."

"I spend some evenings helping and reading with my son but not every evening because I get tied up, time flies and it is time to go to bed."

"Yes, because I am concerned with his education and enjoy listening to him read."

Parents also indicated that they found enjoyment in reading and listenting to their children. They reported:

"Yes, I enjoy reading them to David just as much as he enjoys listening."

"Yes, I have been reading stories to my daughter and she love it. I always have to read it two times to her."

"Yes, we all enjoy the books very much the pictures are so colorful."

"This has been an enjoyable experience not only for my daughter who brings home the books but my 2 year old and six year old enjoy the books also."

The replies indicated that parents clearly understood the significance

children in the Boston school (about 52%) and their parents were involved in all the mini-grant activitives and approximately 95 students were involved in the minigrants designed by the teacher research team. In New York there were 12 grants, reaching approximately 240 children or 30% of the school population.

Learnings from the minigrant program have been grouped into three categories: images of parents that were conveyed in the parent responses, reading patterns of the children involved in the grants, and teachers' reflection on their involvement.

Fifty (50) percent of the parents returned written evaluations to their children's teachers. Of those parents contacted by phone, 100% took the time to talk with the teacher about the projects. Some of the comments from the parents suggested that in response to the teacher initiatives, reading at home had quickly become the routine. In response to the question: "Have you been able to take the time to read the stories to your child each day? Please explain" typical parent respones included:

" Just about all the books I have read except for one which was because we had such a busy night."

"Yes, every evening after dinner we read stories."

"Yes, I ususally read the book to Eboni at night before she goes to bed."

" Yes, I have read all the stories that he brought home with him. Leon and his brother enjoyed them so that I read some of them twice or three times."

"Yes, I take an hour each time she brings home a book I read to her and try to help her read along with me."

of reading and were extremely supportive of the goals of the projects:

"Yes, we found special time together together that we haven't had before."

"Yes, because I think it's a great idea for kids to get interested in books at an early age."

"Yes, This program encourages reading and enhances the school experience. Please continue the program, it has and can open ideas of not only love of reading but gives quality time to families."

" Yes, I think reading sends a child mind to fun places as he or she is being read to and providing books help the child to use his imagination."

"She enjoys doing what she is doing. The books have been fun. She plays school with her brother and sisters."

Students' Evaluation of the Minigrant Reading Project

In terms of the children's reading patterns, oral questioning of first graders and written evaluations from 2 nd and 3rd graders indicated the almost all the children took the books home and read them. Of the 44 students in the 2nd and 3rd grade classes, 41 said they took the books home and read them. In the second grade students read to someone else, in the third grade they primarily read alone: of 29 second graders, 22 read to a family member, in the third grade only 5 of 15 read to someone else. Most children, when they read to someone, read to their mothers, but several read to their fathers, brothers, sisters, and grandparents.

When asked what the best part of the project was some of the children replied: "the books", "we get to pick our own books", "books

and the bag", "because the books are funny", "all of it", "to read to my Mom and Dad", "taking books home", "reading". And when asked why they thought their teachers had started the project, the replied; "so we know how to read books", "so we could improve our reading skills", "so we can read more", "so our reading skills could come up", and finally perhaps the most accurate answer of all "because she loves us". The last question for the children in the second grade was "How do you feel when you finish reading a book to someone in your family?" The answers were all positive except one. Children said "happy", "good", "I feel happy", "very happy", and "I feel very, very happy inside".

We compiled a list of the students preferences for new books and sent it as a letter to the librarian at the school. We hoped she would consider the topics when ordering new books. The topics were quite predictable: sharks, dinosaurs, famous people, how things work, animals, and mysteries.

Teachers' Evaluation of the Mini-grants

Teachers were also asked to evaluate the grant program. All teachers who received a mini-grant were asked to fill out an evaluation of the grant process. Some of their replies are given below:

"All parents who wrote me were pleased with the project. They were pleased with their child's enthusiasm and learning progress. They hope that the project will be continued in the future. It has been a rewarding experience for all concerned."

"The parents and kids are working together on the family history project. The kids love the book, The Secret of Gumbo Grove. The

parents are collecting pictures, telling stories etc. Some families find it hard because it raises unresolved questions about families members, but I tell them every family has people the family doesn't want to talk about, it's ok. Some families are splitting up and it's hard, like which pictures do I keep? But some say wow this is great let's work on this together."

Teachers mentioned several benefits of the project to themselves and the children:

"The children had an opportunity to observe and experience first hand what we are studying in the classroom. Having their parents along (on a field trip) made it very special for them."

"Parents had a wonderful time (class art project). They learned something new. They enjoyed working with the materials and the students. The children felt "special" participating in a special project. New skills and vocabulary were learned."

"The children in my class are attracted to reading books. They have read many books to and with their parents and siblings. I have learned more about the variety of multicultural books available. Most of all I have been deeply satisfied by the overwhelming positive feedback received from so many of the parents. It's been a tremendous morale booster !"

Given the backdrop of limited family school contact described in the literature concerning urban schools and in the data from the

interviews with the faculties of the laboratory schools, the mini-grant projects provide a quite striking example of positive parent/teacher interaction. Within a simple format, teachers established projects that reflected their agendas. They designed projects to reach all parents, not a targeted group. Their projects had immediate classroom payback and were based on solid conclusions from research about the value of including parents in children's education experience, especially by providing home activities to enhance school learning.

Parents were extremely responsive. They appreciated the suggestions and opportunities for participation. Their written responses to the evaluation demonstrated concern for their children's schooling and substantial efforts to follow through on teacher suggestions. They also reflected joy in their children's development: they sounded like 'every parent'. If Lightfoot is correct that we carry with us, consciously or not, many of the social and racial stereotypes of our society the response of these parents raises a challenge to notions of "hard to reach" or disinterested parents. These small projects helped teachers and parents to "find faces in the crowd" and while not all the projects brought parents into the schools, they all were interactive. Teachers and parents were communicating and some perceptions were changing.

Finally, several comments by the parents indicated they hoped the projects would continue, as if, without the "project" suggesting and/or facilitating these efforts, they were not likely to continue doing the activities on their own. Teachers, at the close of the SRO project mentioned the same concern. Without "the project", they felt the initiatives would not continue. Even though they knew how to proceed with a new round of mini-grants, they were unsure that the school and teachers would continue the various outreach efforts demonstrated in

the grants as if the old norms would simply return and cancel out this new learning. This points to the significance of integrating parent activities into the work of the school:

> "to sustain desirable home-school relationships, student growth, and achievement at a desired level, the attitudes, values and behaviors that promote these conditions must be institutionalized or become part of the school structure and ethos. When the entire school supports parent involvement-- or any other shared attitude, value, or behavior-- it is easier for the individual teacher to work with parents in a constructive way." (Comer, 1990)

SECTION IU

TEACHER ACTION RESEARCH:

BUILDING COLLABORATIVE STRUCTURE FOR SCHOOLS

What follows is a brief discussion of the experience of the teacher research teams which focuses on the extent to which the activities of the team reflected the qualities of organizational health decribed in the literature on organizations(support for members, opportunities for professional growth, and opportunities for choice and shared decision making) and furthered the development of their schools toward collaborative institutions.

Support for Members

The data in the first area "support and care for individuals" reveal that while teachers do provide support for one another, the structure of the school impedes those efforts. Studies of teaching often describe how very isolating teaching can be (Lortie, 1975; Lieberman, 1984; Johnson, 1990).

Teachers on the research teams, meeting either weekly or monthly often commented on how "wonderful it was to sit and talk about issues and concerns". For one teacher, the teams provided:

> "...the opportunity to talk and share ideas, discuss, and get to know where fellow teachers are coming from and experiencing. We as teachers are terribly isolated. We go into our classrooms and teach. There is very little time to communicate with one another and so we carry home a whole bag of experiences, problems, and ideas each day that become stored in our memories, never to be expressed or shared."

Teachers seemed to use the opportunity to talk as a way of gaining some control over troublesome issues that they faced during the school day. Topics discussed often dealt with difficult students and their extremely stressful home situations and provided suggestions for action. A topic frequently discussed was the idea of home visits. Several times throughout the year, teachers mentioned the Head Start experience of planned parent involvement and frequent home visits. They saw these visits as "ideal" and yet were concerned that home visits in their school area might be somewhat dangerous and were certain to provoke new issues that the school might not be able to deal with. Some teachers did make home visits but usually after other attempts at communication with the families had failed. Such efforts were often shared among the groups. Teachers reported that letters home to parents had produced classroom volunteers and adults willing to go on field trips, that phone calls had been warmly received, and that parents were coming to school for conferences about a child. Thus the group heard not only the issues of troubled children but the positive results of efforts to communiate.

Although they clearly valued the opportunity to meet, teachers commented that getting together was a thing of the past:

> "We used to socialize more, but in the last few years, things have gotten a lot worse. There is a lack of togetherness, no cohesiveness. Things seem to go their way, not ours. We had better years."

In one school, factors limiting faculty cohesiveness were readily

identified. For example, 8 of 20 faculty members transferred in one year; almost 30% of the student body changed schools; the children at the school came from 12 zip code areas across the city; new teachers were being hired through September; two teachers left abruptly during the school year; and several teachers had second jobs which began immediately after the school day ended. Without very explicit efforts to bring the faculty together and time provided to do so, it is not surprising that teachers say they do not know what other teachers, even in the rooms next to them, are teaching.

Such changes affect even the most outgoing and supportive teachers. One teacher said:

> "I used to welcome new people and say if you need help, if I can help you, please come and ask. I don't say that anymore, they all came, all year long. It was just too much. Now I just say, welcome."

The teacher research teams reflected this instability. Of the 9 who participated in workshops in the spring of 1989, only 6 were still in the schools in the fall of 1989. By the late spring of 1990, only three teachers of the original nine remained at the two schools.

Opportunities for Professional Growth

Meetings seemed to produce very different discusssions depending on where they were held. If the team met in the school, sitting in small children's chairs, rushing to eat lunch or clear the building before the custodian locked it, the discussion was limited, while if the teams met in nearby museums or restaurants, they became more reflective, personal, and relaxed. In these adult settings, professional issues were more often raised.

Teachers thought a great deal about the meaning of

professionalism. Some teachers took courses after school in order to receive higher salaries, change teaching specialties, or "advance" into administration. For example, one team member enrolled in two courses at the University. She was often at school late at night. Another teacher used after school time to mentor teachers in other schools. Another used some time to enroll her most troublesome students in a karate class, pay their tuition, and drive them to class and home. Some acted as referral agents for families in stress, others wrote letters to obtain funding for special programs. Many met after school without compensation to help plan award assemblies, and other special events for children. They all work hard. Few received a note of thanks for any of these extras efforts.

Teachers found it confounding, they were pulled in many directions to serve their students and yet the school rarely acknowledged or facilitatesd their work. The reward system within the school paid a higher salary for the university coursework than for home visits. This meant that actions taken individually by teachers to build stronger relationships with families; actions which might later lead to positive motivation and achievement for children, were not recognized by the school system. Some teachers expressed frustration at the reward and compensation system. Some refused to attend unpaid afterschool meetings. But many chose to participate in out-of-classroom activities when they could. And several expressed both optimism and caution about the new planning committees established in the laboratory schools.

Teachers noted the increase in parent activities, and they were extremely pleased by the parent response to the minigrants and

genuinely appreciative of the parents efforts to celebrate Teacher Appreciation Day luncheons. In one school, parents and teacher met together for "study seminars" on the topic of parent involvement and their evaluations indicated that it was a very positive experience. Teachers said they liked "the openness and the frankness", and "I think these seminars are important in bridging the gaps between teachers and parents". Parents' comments were also positive, for example, "Thank you for letting this be a place for us to discuss things as we the people and not separate parts as you the parent and you the teacher."

The concept that part of the role of a teaching professional is to work cooperatively with the adults in a child's life was reinforced. In one school teachers began to ask the parents for help with their activities such as holiday fairs and fundraising efforts. In one school the parent center fostered greater greater connections and the development of mutual respect. Teachers often commented on the work of the parents as they helped others find new homes, secure employment or work out child care issues. In the discussions of the teacher research team these changes in parent involvement were noted. Such critical reflection, similar to the concepts expressed by Schon in <u>The Reflective Practitioner</u>, is rarely an integral part of school organizational life (Johnson, 1990).

The teachers were particularly conscious of questions of student self esteem. One teacher researcher tried hard not to make special education referrals and instead worked with parents to get counseling for children. One teacher commented on tracking in the first and second grades:

> "these kids aren't slow, they just don't have a language, tracking ,it gives me a bad feeling in my stomach. It's so

unfair. (Because of language) I would have been in the lower tracks, but my girls did beautifully, in higher tracks, but ..it isn't right."

Another teacher, recognizing the stress in childrens' lives said:

"You know I was just sitting here thinking, you know how if you go back over your own personal life, when you were a child and look at how important some things were...and dig back to the things that were good for you. And who is doing that for these children? It's really scary."

Some of the teachers were concerned that the traditional calendar of holidays that often drives elementary curriculum is no longer suited to their classrooms. The Christmas pagant is now the Holiday party, but even that doesn't fit. One teacher asked:

"What about holidays, how do we celebrate? We have Moslem kids, Jehovah Witnesses, Chinese kids. How can we do Christmas with them? I can't just wrap a present in plain paper and hand other kids Christmas stockings."

Other teachers in the groups had moved into curriculum driven by themes, for example racial harmony, multicultural activities, finding one's own history and begun to celebrate diversity. These ideas were quickly absorbed by other team members.

Finally teachers are very concerned about the effects of violence on the children they teach. Two teachers provided time every morning for the children to write in journals as a way of help them rid themselves of the problems of the evening before.

" These kids have so much to deal with. They came to me and said they couldn't finish the homework because there

was a shoot out. In a way you try and make the environment that they are in...you say to them everything at home is not going to go away but while you are here let's see if you can learn....

If you start out teaching and think it's just teaching you are wrong. And unless you can cope you are going to get really burned out."

Gradually teachers altered the focus of their reflection and began to talk about school practices which affect parent teacher partnerships. One teacher commented:

"I think teachers think that parents are in a lower social class, and they are viewed by the teachers as lower. I have a friend who is very middle class, she speaks Spanish. She told me she can't get decent service, attention for her children's need. I think teachers may perpetuate a class issue. They need to be more sensitive to the class issue, more perceptive."

Teachers taking "their own daily lives as the objects of their own reflection" began to "develop a distance from their daily lives in which they are generally immersed and to which they ascribe an aura of permanence" (Cochran, 1987). In their discussions about working with parents, many of these individual issues were brought together. In an extensive interview, one researcher explained how she begins the year and what her strategies are:

On day one, I tell them what I tolerate and what I don't. What I don't is a very long list. I show them the best work of other students from years ago and tell them that is what I expect. I talk a lot about expectations. We have long

conversations about that. I talk like I talk to my son. We do a lot of work, my expectations are very high. But with work comes fun. We have a lot of parties, even Thanksgiving at school. Parents always do all the food. We had a hotel child last year who wasn't going to have a Thanksgiving so we had it here. The parents made a 30 lb turkey and so much food, we had another class join us.

I divide my class so I have group leaders who tutor and coach slower students. A lot of work is done in teams. I studied the work of Ron Edmunds. I believe all children can learn. I expect them to succeed and I share with them what my and the schools measurements are. We have goals, like the class will increase reading scores by 30% etc.

When I call parents I tell them that I don't think that they, as a parent, would have approved of their child's behavior in that day. I speak as a parent. I know the deal. I am raising a Black boy in America today. I am raising a scholar.I suggest punishments when I speak to parents. I provide real structure and a lot of discipline, but I hug them and I love them.

I believe there is a conspiracy not to educate. There are huge bodies of literature that people ignore.I am not a superintendent or chancellor. I am a teacher and I know this. What the hell is going on? I can't be the only one saying this....I can go into any class and make it like the one you saw today..."

<u>Opportunities for Shared Decision Making</u>

While individual teachers may have altered some of their

behaviors toward parents, the teacher research teams had extremely limited impact on school hierarchy and school decision making. Without skilled administrative direction and explicit efforts to create collaboration, individual teachers continued to adjust to the realities of their school life rather than participate in restructing it.

At the first teacher research meetings, teachers made wish lists of "quick" changes they thought the school could undertake to improve relationships in their schools. They suggested an open house for new and old faculty to meet each other, a welcoming committee and two days of before school meetings to orient new personnel. They suggested a year long calendar with events and activities clearly spelled out so that parents could plan their school visits within their work schedules. They suggested a resource guide of community services so that teachers could make referrals to parents when they saw the need and a list of individuals in the school and the languages they spoke so they would know who to ask for translating assistance. They suggested some discretionary money be made available for materials and supplies, admission costs etc. for classroom activities throughout the year. And they suggested more parent volunteers in their classes and a school wide planning committee that included teachers, parents, paraprofessionals and custodians. The list was extensive, and the ideas came quickly. But, these changes required schoolwide decisions and the planning committees were just beginning.

Individuals varied in terms of their initial capacities and comfort in working with parents. Their behaviors may have been supported by the team experience, but they also began the experience with predispositions to work with parents or not. That disparity, however,

seemed less important than the fact that those teachers who did make new or additional efforts to reach parents became the models for other teachers. Giving a public quality to the work of even a few teachers helped to spread the behavior among other faculty members and perhaps raised the levels of expectations. It operated like a diffusion network. In November, one of the researchers gave a copy of her minigrant application to a previously uninvolved teacher. That teachers' application came in two weeks later, followed two weeks later by a third application. All three had very similar wording and intent: one was from an SRO teacher researcher, two were from teachers close to the researcher but quite removed from the project.

While individual teachers may have altered some of their behaviors toward parents, the teacher research teams had extremely limited impact on school hierarchy and school decision making. The leadership styles of the principals varied, but these styles are critical to the change process in schools. School planning councils were begun at the beginning of the second year of the project and the teacher research teams were not connected directly to these decision making structures. Thus changes were informal, the result of individual lobbying efforts, not a systematic or shared decision making policy. Still, some success can be noted.

The teacher research team gave some measure of permission to individuals to try something new. One teacher, after receiving parent evaluations from her minigrant said, "I never hear such good things from parents before, but then again, I never asked'. Her intent is to continue the project next year and to ask parents for feedback more often. Some teachers expressed the feeling of becoming a change agent in the school. One said, "we weren't just researchers, we did

something !".

Personal Reflections

Like the teachers, I reflected on the experience of building closer relationships between families and the schools and on the experience of the teacher research team as well. I moved from working exclusively with teachers, to participation in the activities of the parent centers and thus had an opportunity to hear both teacher and parent agendas and opinions. As the project developed, three themes emerged from my reflections.

The Nature of Facilitation

The first of these themes has to do with the nature of assistance: to parents, to teachers, and the children in relation to the concept of deficits. Parents often said they did not know how to help their children with, for example, their mathematics homework. They confused doing the math assignments with creating an environment, encouraging the effort, and conveying the confidence that mathematics was doable. Schools, even when they are eager to reach out to parents, often see their responsibility as remedial, to repair the deficits in a family. School reform literature has sometimes failed to hear the voice of excellent teachers and their recommendations for school change and has instead seen them as deficient, in need of remaking. I asked the children at one school, who or what helped them succeed and one replied "Me, myself, God, and my Mom". I asked parents what their greatest concern was and one replied "We are losing them, our children are falling through too soon". I asked teachers what they would do with discretionary money and the minigrant projects began. If one listens with the belief that the speaker has a message, there will be a

message. Facilitation is not completing the math assignment, or remaking parents, or giving teachers new administrative directives. It involves strengthening an individual's belief in his/her capacity to do their chosen or necessary work. Faciliatation is not getting people ready to participate. They are ready; but the institutions are often not ready to listen and respond.

Significance of School Leadership Style

Another area of my concern had to do with the significance of the leadership style in the school. Reflecting on my own experience and watching other teachers, I realize that teachers teach each other. They value the knowledge and skills of each other. If school change is to occur, teachers must play a substantial role. Yet, it is the administrator in a building who sets the tone and provides or fails to provide the organizational opportunity for shared learning and teacher leadership. When the project began I thought about the process of facilitation and administration as two separate things; as if one was to empower the client group and another was to run the school. As the project continued I rethought this division. Successful administration is good faciliation with the intention of "creating opportunities, releasing potential, removing obstacles, encouraging growth and providing guidance" (McGregor, 1966)

Research Teams as a Strategy for School Change

The teacher research project was originally designed to provide a systematic method to facilitate and study increased parent involvement.

The method provided a step by step approach to the study of this or any other school issue. It also provided a vehicle for increased collegiality and the development of more trusting relationships among

faculty and between the faculty and administration. While the topic of study for this research effort was how to increase parent involvement, many other topics are equally suited to this method of investigation by teachers. The process of having teachers work together in small problem solving teams, using research techniques, may prove to be one innovation that itself increases the capacity within the school to produce many other innovations. Teacher evaluations supported this idea. One teacher said that the research team method could "help all faculty focus on one problem and in a unified and concerted effort, work to solve the problem" and another suggested "staff development, team teaching, utilizing outside resources , student self esteem, and cooperative learning" as other topics for inquiry. The concept of teachers as researchers, posing questions, gathering data, and implementing new programs based on the data was supported by the teachers. However work of this nature cannot continue on the fringe of the school day; it needs a place in the school schedule with time and resouces allocated to it.

Teacher Research Team Recommendations

In the teams, there was a discussion about how to make teacher research projects more successful. Several suggestions were made including:

1. Gain strong administrative support for the concept of teacher research teams as a strategy for problem solving within the school.

2. Adapt the school structure and schedule to provide at least small amounts of time for meetings, interviews, and the development of new initiatives.

3. Maintain or raise some discretionary funds for the teacher

researcher teams to use for materials for research tasks, for reporting out to faculty, and for piloting new ideas.

4. Develop strategies for the team that emphasize writing and reflecting time.

5. Try to link up with at least one other school where teachers are doing similar projects.

6. Provide some connection to outside research such as university based facilitiators, speakers, or materials in order to build connections between theory and practice.

7. Change membership with each new problem focus in order to move the inquiry model throughout the school and facilitate closer faculty relationships.

Building Collaborative Norms Inside Bureaucracy

The work of Lightfoot in Worlds Apart as one of the elements in the conceptual framework of this study provides an explanation for the often separate worlds of the family and the school. Her concern was that the processes of socialization and education which are often assumed to be separate family and school responsibilities become interconnected so that the educational function of the the family and the socialization role of the school could each be mutually strengthened. But, there were significant barriers to overcome to realize the more positive and mutually supportive parent/teacher relationships as envisioned in the SRO model. .

Comer, as well as many other educational reformers, believes that for these changes in family/school relationships to occur the bureaucractic nature of schools must change and schools must adopt a different organizational structure that reflects the goal of a

partnership and collaboration between parents and teachers. Without these new, more cooperative forums, schools cannot advance the new relationships that develop from other, more social and informal activities. Thus, the school needs to take on an additional role and a new organizational form in recognition of the importance of relationships to learning. Explicit activities are designed to build more positive relationships with families so that families and the school can both teach and socialize for achievement.

Schools Reaching Out in both its program and research component tried to address these two issues. Explicit programming activities sought to bring parents and teachers together in informal, relaxed settings in order to foster, newer more egalitarian relationships. The teacher action research teams were created to research these activities and at the same time to model the characteristics of organizational health so limited in bureaucracy. However, "worlds apart" which began as a term to describe the separation of families and schools, particularly for low income and minority families, became a term which applied equally well to the separation between the vision of collaboration between home and school required for improved student achievement and the current bureaucratic organization of traditional schools.

Both the parent/teacher activities and the teacher research teams offered a contrast to the current school organizational patterns. They were both efforts to empower individuals, encourage choice, and develop shared decision making. Both efforts assumed that all individuals have knowledge that should be shared and considered and that facilitation, not remediation, is the appropriate intervention

strategy. Thus, both are "worlds apart" from the current structures found in most schools today. Traditional bureaucratic structures are based on hierarchy and a segmented approach to problem solving. But, more significantly they reinforce certain assumptions about people; assumptions which are fundamentally disempowering (Lieberman, 1990). Some individuals have a greater or lesser right to speak, make decisions, and influence the organization. Parent involvement, teacher research teams, and similar efforts to give voice to those inside this system challenge these assumptions. Partnerships are inclusive, they assume that good ideas are rather evenly distributed throughout any group of people, and that collaboration leads to better ideas, and greater ownership of those ideas by those who are responsble to carry them out.

Both parent involvement and teacher action research are potentially successful strategies toward school reform. By their inclusive strategy, they alter hierarchy. Yet, they both depend heavily on continuous school to home communication, flexible resources for explicit programing to bring parents and teachers together, administrative vision and support and the creation of a structured forum where new relationships, once begun, can developed into partnerships for school change.

The process of having employees work together in small problem solving teams has been used successfully in private settings as a way of creating a problem solving structure, outside of, but complementary to, an existing hierarchy. Even the limited experience of the teacher teams this past year suggests that this problem solving model can be a useful strategy to moderate the bureaucratic structure of schools and

introduce characteristics of flexible, participatory organizations into the school life. However, without strong administrative support and resources allocated to such efforts, teacher research teams, while providing support and some element of professional growth for teachers, cannot alter the decision making structures within the school.

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